

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 5 | Issue 2

Article 7

---

4-1-1988

## A Refutation of Rowe's Critique of Anselm's Ontological Argument

Georges Dicker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Dicker, Georges (1988) "A Refutation of Rowe's Critique of Anselm's Ontological Argument," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol5/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

# A REFUTATION OF ROWE'S CRITIQUE OF ANSELM'S ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Georges Dicker

In William L. Rowe's "The Ontological Argument," an essay that appears in the most recent editions of Feinberg's *Reason and Responsibility* and as a chapter in Rowe's *Philosophy of Religion*, Rowe reconstructs Anselm's *Proslogium II* argument for the existence of God, surveys critically several standard objections to it, and presents an original critique. Although Rowe's reconstruction is perspicuous and his criticisms of the standard objections are judicious, his own critique, I argue, leaves Anselm's argument unscathed. I conclude with some programmatic remarks about what a more adequate critique of Anselm's argument should do.

## 1. Introduction

In William L. Rowe's "The Ontological Argument," an essay that appears in the most recent editions of Feinberg's *Reason and Responsibility* and as a chapter in Rowe's *Philosophy of Religion*, Rowe reconstructs Anselm's *Proslogium II* argument for the existence of God, surveys critically several standard objections to it, and offers an original critique.<sup>1</sup> My purpose in this paper is to refute Rowe's critique. Although Rowe's reconstruction of Anselm's argument is perspicuous and his criticisms of the standard objections are judicious, his own critique, as I shall try to show, leaves Anselm's argument unscathed. First I shall summarize Rowe's reconstruction. Then I shall analyze his critique, after which I shall argue that it fails. I shall end with some programmatic remarks about what a more adequate critique of Anselm's argument should do.

## 2. Rowe's Reconstruction of Anselm's Argument

Rowe prefaces his reconstruction by slightly simplifying Anselm's definition of God as "a being than which none greater can be conceived." To allow himself to use the singular term "God" to abbreviate Anselm's characterization, he replaces "a being" with "the being." And to avoid the psychological connotations of "than which none greater can be conceived," he substitutes the phrase "than which none greater is possible." Accordingly, Rowe uses the term "God" throughout his reconstruction as simply an abbreviation of its *definiens*, i.e., of



the longer phrase, "the being than which none greater is possible."<sup>2</sup>

Rowe's reconstruction has three basic premisses:

1. God exists (at least) in the understanding.<sup>3</sup>
2. God could exist in reality (God is a possible being).<sup>4</sup>
3. If X exists in the understanding but not in reality, and X could exist in reality, then X could be greater than it is.<sup>5</sup>

From these three premisses, Rowe reconstructs Anselm's *reductio* of the fool's denial that God exists, as follows:

4. God exists in the understanding but not in reality. (assumption for *reductio*)
5. God could be greater than He is. (from 2, 3, and 4)
6. God is a being than which a greater is possible. (from 5)
7. The being than which none greater is possible is a being than which a greater is possible. (by substituting the *definiens* of "God" for "God" in 6)
8. It is not the case that: God exists in the understanding but not in reality. (from 4-7 by *reductio ad absurdum*)
9. God exists in reality. (from 1 and 8)<sup>6</sup>

Having so reconstructed Anselm's argument, Rowe successively examines the objections of Gaunilo, Kant, and C. D. Broad. Finding none of these compelling, he offers an original critique, to which I now turn.

### 3. Rowe's Critique of Anselm

To understand Rowe's critique, we need to note three concepts that he defines early in his essay: the concepts of an *existing thing*, a *nonexisting thing*, and a *possible thing*. Existing things are simply things that exist, such as the Empire State Building, dogs, and the planet Mars. Nonexisting things are things that do not exist, such as The Fountain of Youth, unicorns, and The Abominable Snowman. Possible things are things that, unlike round squares, are not impossible things.<sup>7</sup> Rowe also puts forward an important principle that links the three concepts: a possible thing must be either an existing thing or a nonexisting thing.<sup>8</sup>

Having defined these notions, Rowe introduces his critique of Anselm by inviting us to consider a highly simplified version of the Ontological Argument. Its first premiss is a definition:

- i. God = *df* an existing, wholly perfect being.

Its second premiss is the necessary truth that:

- ii. An existing, wholly perfect being cannot fail to exist.

Now, Rowe points out, all that follows from (i) and (ii) is that

iii. No nonexistent thing is God.

It does *not* follow, however, that

iv. Some existing thing is God.

Therefore, this simple ontological argument does not prove that God exists.<sup>9</sup>

Rowe believes that the same basic point can be made against Anselm's more complicated argument. Here is the key passage of his essay:

The implications of these considerations for Anselm's ingenious argument can now be traced. Anselm conceives of God as a being than which none greater is possible. He then claims that existence is a great-making quality and something that has it is greater than it would have been had it lacked existence. Clearly, then, no non-existing thing can exemplify Anselm's concept of God. For if we suppose that some non-existing thing exemplifies Anselm's concept of God and also suppose that that non-existing thing might have existed in reality (is a possible thing) then we are supposing that that non-existing thing (1) might have been a greater thing, and (2) is, nevertheless, a thing than which a greater is not possible. Thus far Anselm's reasoning is, I believe, impeccable. But what follows from it? All that follows is that no non-existing thing can be God (as Anselm conceives of God). All that follows is that given Anselm's concept of God, the proposition, "Some non-existing thing is God," cannot be true . . . What remains to be shown is that some existing thing exemplifies Anselm's concept of God. What really does follow from his reasoning is that the only thing that logically could exemplify his concept of God is something which actually exists. And this conclusion is not without interest. But from the mere fact that nothing but an existing thing could exemplify Anselm's concept of God, it does not follow that some existing thing actually does exemplify his concept of God . . .<sup>10</sup>

What Rowe has done here is to go back through Anselm's argument, and to paraphrase it in accordance with the following schema:

- 1a. God = *df* the being than which none greater is possible.<sup>11</sup>
2. God could exist in reality (God is a possible being).
- 3a. If X is a nonexistent thing and X could exist in reality (i.e. is a possible being), then X could be greater than it is.
- 4a. Some nonexistent thing is God. (assumption for *reductio*)
5. God could be greater than He is. (2, 3a, 4a)

- 6. God is a being than which a greater is possible. (5)
- 7. The being than which none greater is possible is a being than which a greater is possible. (1a, 6)
- 8a. It is not the case that some nonexistent thing is God. (4a-7, *reductio ad absurdum*)

Having so paraphrased Anselm's argument, Rowe directs his key point against it: While the reasoning is "impeccable," it fails to prove that God exists. For (8a) only says that *no nonexistent thing is God*; it does not say that *some existing thing is God*. In other words, (8a) is so to speak merely "negative information:" all it says is that a nonexistent thing cannot be God, cannot satisfy the definition or exemplify the concept of God—from which it doesn't follow that any (existing) thing does satisfy that definition or exemplify that concept.

At this point, however, Rowe finds a "major difficulty" in his own critique.<sup>12</sup> This difficulty stems from the principle linking possible, existing, and nonexistent things that we noted a moment ago. Suppose we add this principle to the argument:

- 9a. If X is a possible thing, then X is either an existing thing or a nonexistent thing.

The difficulty is that now the conclusion that God really exists follows, in just two easy steps:

- 10. God is either an existing thing or a nonexistent thing. (2, 9a)
- 11. God is an existing thing. (8a, 10)

Nevertheless, Rowe does not believe that this difficulty defeats his critique. In the last episode of his essay, he raises a final objection to Anselm's argument—one that he sees as "the solution to [the] major difficulty" just raised.<sup>13</sup> This final objection is that premiss (2)—the premiss that God could exist in reality, or is a possible being—in effect begs the question.

To see why Rowe thinks that (2) begs the question, we need to appreciate two points. First, if we grant steps (1a)-(8a) of the above argument, then what we are granting, basically, is that it follows from the definition of God that no nonexistent thing can be God. Second, to accept Rowe's principle (9a) is to accept the idea that there is a class of all possible things, composed of existing things and nonexistent things. The consequence of these two points is that merely by placing God in the class of possible things, we are *ipso facto* placing Him among the existing things; i.e., that He exists. Rowe's example of a "magician" is helpful here.<sup>14</sup> Suppose that we define a "magician" as *an existing magician*, and accept principle (9a). Now suppose someone asks: is a magician a possible thing? Well, just by answering "yes," we would be saying that magicians exist. We would be saying that there really are people who possess the special charac-

teristics (besides existence) required to be a magican; namely, the characteristics of magicians. But surely, one cannot so easily prove that such people exist! Likewise, Anselm's argument does not really prove that God exists.<sup>15</sup>

Rowe draws a moral from this final objection to Anselm. The moral is that one can have a coherent concept of something even if that concept does not pick out any possible object. For example, suppose that no magicians exist. Then the concept "magican"—an existing magician—does not pick out any possible object at all: it does not pick out a nonexistent object, since "magican" is defined as an existing magician; and it does not pick out an existing object, since there are no magicians. Yet, the concept of a magican is not self-contradictory (like the concept of a round square); it is perfectly coherent.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. *Refutation of Rowe's Critique*

One may well have misgivings about Rowe's ontology of nonexistent things. To mention just a couple of odd consequences: suppose that today there are no magicians. Then a "magican" is not even a possible object, as we have seen. But surely a magician *could* begin to exist tomorrow, in which case (s)he would be an existing magician—i.e., a magican. So (a) a thing that is not possible is, nevertheless, one that *can* exist, and (b) a thing can be impossible at one time and possible at another.

However, I shall not press the difficulties that arise from Rowe's postulation of nonexistent things.<sup>17</sup> Rather, I want to show that even given this postulation, his critique of Anselm's argument fails. It fails because in the course of his critique, Rowe changes Anselm's argument, and indeed deviates from his own reconstruction of the argument. But when the parts of the argument that Rowe changes are restored, it escapes his critique. Let me now support these claims.

Recall how Anselm states the assumption for *reductio*. He does not state it as "some nonexistent thing is God." Rather, he states it as: "God exists only in the understanding;" or, equivalently and on the model of Rowe's own reconstruction, "God exists in the understanding but not in reality." In order to determine whether Rowe's basic objection damages Anselm's argument, then, we must see whether the objection still holds when the assumption for *reductio* is formulated in this manner. Let us therefore recast the argument as follows:

- 1a. God =*df* the being than which none greater is possible.
  2. God could exist in reality (God is a possible being).
  3. If X exists in the understanding but not in reality, and X could exist in reality, then X could be greater than it is.
  - 4b. Something that exists in the understanding but not in reality is God.
- [Regiment as: "There is an *x* such that *x* exists in the understanding and

$x$  does not exist in reality, and  $x$  is identical with God.”] (assumption for *Reductio*)

5. God could be greater than He is. (2, 3, 4b)

6. God is a being than which a greater is possible. (5)

7. The being than which none greater is possible is a being than which a greater is possible. (1a, 6)

8b. It is not the case that: something that exists in the understanding but not in reality is God. [Regiment as negation of regimentation of (4b)] (4b-7, *reductio ad absurdum*)

At this point, it may seem that Rowe’s basic objection to Anselm still holds. For the only point established in (8b) is that *nothing that exists in the understanding but not in reality is God*. It does not follow that *something that exists in reality (or exists both in the understanding and in reality) is God*. Line (8b), like line (8a) in the previous argument, is only “negative information.” It merely says that a thing that exists only in the understanding cannot be God, does not satisfy the definition or exemplify the concept of God—from which it doesn’t follow that anything does satisfy that definition or exemplify that concept.

However, the last argument is still not equivalent to Anselm’s. For it omits Anselm’s premiss that God exists in the understanding. But this premiss—the very first one in Rowe’s own reconstruction—is essential to Anselm’s argument! As Rowe himself indicates, Anselm takes pains to justify the premiss.<sup>18</sup> The argument that results when the premiss is omitted is just not Anselm’s.

What happens when the premiss is restored? The answer is that the argument becomes valid. To see this, we need only supply the omitted premiss:

9b. Something that exists (at least) in the understanding is God. [Regiment as: “There is an  $x$  such that  $x$  exists in the understanding, and  $x$  is identical with God.”]

It now follows from (8b) and (9b) that:

10a. Something that exists in reality is God. [Regiment as: “There is an  $x$  such that  $x$  exists in reality, and  $x$  is identical with God.”] (Q. E. D.)

A simpler way to formulate the last three lines, using Descartes’s borrowed notion of existing “objectively” (i.e., as an object of thought) would be:

8c. It is not the case that something that exists objectively but not really is God.

9c. Something that exists objectively is God.

10b. Something that exists really is God. (8c, 9c)

Either way, the validity of the argument’s final step can be proved in first-order

logic: from " $\neg (\exists x) [(Ux \cdot \neg Rx) \cdot (x = a)]$ " and " $(\exists x) [Ux \cdot (x = a)]$ ," one can derive " $(\exists x) [Rx \cdot (x = a)]$ ,"<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, if we try to formulate the argument without premiss (9b) or (9c), then (10a) and (10b) cannot be derived.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, this premiss is essential to the logic of Anselm's argument.

But what of Rowe's last point—that premiss (2) ("God could exist in reality") in effect begs the question? Rowe might say that even if my refutation of his fundamental criticism is correct, his final objection still holds, because Anselm is still committed also to lines (3a), (8a), and (9a) of the argument given in section 3, so that so long as he affirms (2), he is virtually asserting that God exists. So the mere use of (2) in effect begs the question.

The answer to this objection is that one need not interpret (2) to mean

(2a) God is a possible thing.

Rather, one can interpret (2) to mean:

(2b) It is not self-contradictory to assert that God exists.

Of course, (3) must then be understood as meaning:

(3b) If X exists in the understanding but not in reality, and it is not self-contradictory to assert that X exists (in reality), then X could be greater than it is.

These interpretations of premisses (2) and (3) seem to be ones that Anselm could easily live with.

Rowe cannot simply reply that (2b) entails (2a). For such an entailment would rest on the principle that

12. If it is not self-contradictory to assert that X exists, then X is a possible thing.

But (12), together with other elements of Rowe's position, leads to a paradox. For suppose that there happen to be no magicians. We have already seen that this supposition, together with the definition of a "magician" as "an existing magician," implies that

13. No existing thing is a magician and no nonexisting thing is a magician.

But (13), together with Rowe's principle (9a)—that if X is a possible thing, then X is either an existing thing or a nonexisting thing—entails that

14. A magician is not a possible thing.

Now it follows from (12) and (14) that

15. It is self-contradictory to assert that a magician exists.

But surely, this is an absurd result: it means that in a magicianless universe,



“magicans exist” is a self-contradictory statement.

There appear to be only two ways that Rowe can avoid this paradox. One way is to deny (12). This is in effect the course that Rowe takes, since, as we have seen, he insists that a coherent (=non self-contradictory) concept need not pick out any possible object. But once (12) is denied, there is no basis for saying that (2b) entails (2a); so Anselm can avoid Rowe’s charge of circularity by interpreting premiss (2) as (2b). The other way would be for Rowe to give up his principle (9a). Notice that this would *not* require denying the necessary truth that if X is a possible thing (=if it is possible that X exists), then either X exists or X does not exist. I suspect that Rowe’s espousal of (9a) may reflect a failure to distinguish it clearly from this necessary truth. But be that as it may, giving up (9a) avoids the paradox, because (14) cannot be derived without (9a). Now it seems to me that this is by far the better way to avoid the paradox, since the denial of (12) has nothing to recommend it. But I need not insist on this point for present purposes. I need only point out that if Rowe denies (9a), then his charge of circularity is undermined. For only if (9a) is assumed does it follow that, since God cannot be a nonexistent thing, asserting that He is a possible thing is tantamount to asserting that He exists. Therefore, whether Rowe avoids the paradox by denying (12) or by giving up (9a), his final criticism of Anselm fails.

### 5. Conclusion: Some Programmatic Remarks

The moral I wish to draw from my refutation of Rowe’s critique is that Anselm’s premiss that God exists in the understanding is crucial to his argument. One way to refute that argument, accordingly, would be to refute this premiss. Anselm believes that one must accept the premiss in order even to deny the existence of God. For he takes the statement, “God does not exist,” to mean, “God exists in the understanding but not in reality,” which *entails* that God exists in the understanding. So, Anselm thinks, the fool must accept the premiss because it follows from his very denial of God.

But what if Anselm is wrong in thinking that “God does not exist” means “God exists only in the understanding?” What if, as many philosophers now hold, the fool’s denial means something like “the concept of God is not exemplified” or “The term ‘God’ does not apply to anything?” Then Anselm’s argument collapses, for not only is the premiss that God exists in the understanding simply false, but the “assumption for *reductio*” can no longer generate a contradiction.<sup>21</sup>

Anselm, however, has a reason for interpreting “God does not exist” as “God exists in the understanding but not in reality;” namely, his view that “whatever is understood, exists in the understanding.”<sup>22</sup> Now there is a philosophical question

that motivates this view: What makes a person's thought of (say) the Taj Mahal a thought *of* or *about* the Taj Mahal? Although I feel quite sure that this question can be satisfactorily answered without resorting to the notion that the Taj Mahal exists "in the person's understanding," this is not to say that I am prepared to give such an answer. Yet a definitive refutation of Anselm's premiss, I suggest, requires an answer. Pending that, the strongest objection that can be made to the premiss is that it uncritically assumes that merely intentional objects exist—at least in the understanding.<sup>23</sup>

*State University of New York at Brockport*

### NOTES

1. All page references to Rowe's essay will be to its latest reprinting in Joel Feinberg (ed.), *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy*, Sixth Edition (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1985), pp. 8-17, and will be given simply as "Rowe, p.---." The essay previously appeared as Chapter III of William L. Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction* (Belmont, California: Dickenson, 1978), and in the 3rd (1975), 4th (1978), and 5th (1981) editions of *Reason and Responsibility*.

2. Rowe, p. 10, p. 17 note 3. It is doubtful that Rowe's substitution of "the" for "a" constitutes any modification of Anselm's own definition. For in *Proslogium II*, Anselm twice characterizes God as "that, than which nothing greater can be conceived" (my emphasis).

3. Rowe, p. 10. I have added the parenthetical "at least."

4. Rowe, p. 10. Rowe words this premiss as "God might have existed in reality (God is a possible being)." I shall also use "could exist in reality" rather than Rowe's "might have existed in reality" in the rest of the reconstruction.

5. Rowe, p. 10. Rowe words this premiss as "If something exists only in the understanding and might have existed in reality, then it might have been greater than it is." But he explains that "exists only in the understanding" is short for "exists in the understanding but not in reality" (p. 9). I have substituted the longer phrase for the shorter one, and used "X" instead of "something," here and throughout the rest of the reconstruction.

6. Rowe words this conclusion, following Anselm, as "God exists in reality as well as in the understanding." I have nevertheless omitted the conjunct, "in the understanding," since it is merely a repetition of premiss (1).

7. Rowe, p. 9.

8. Rowe, p. 15, p. 16.

9. Rowe, p. 14.

10. Rowe, pp. 14-15.

11. I continue to use "the being" rather than "a being."

12. Rowe, p. 15.

13. Rowe, p. 15.

14. Rowe, pp. 14-15.

15. Rowe, p. 16.

16. Rowe, p. 15.

17. Some of these consequences are brought out by Clement Dore in "Descartes's Meditation V Proof of God's Existence," pp. 155-56 and p. 160, note 9. In Alfred J. Freddoso (ed.), *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame and London: Notre Dame University Press, 1983), pp. 143-60.

18. Rowe, p. 9.

19. A derivation can be given as follows:

- |   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| (1) $(\exists x)[(Ux \cdot (x = a))]$                   |                    |
| (2) $\neg(\exists x)[(Ux \cdot \neg Rx) \cdot (x = a)]$ |                    |
| (3) $Uy \cdot (y = a)$                                  | (1), EI            |
| (4) $(x) \neg[(Ux \cdot \neg Rx) \cdot (x = a)]$        | (2), QN            |
| (5) $\neg[(Uy \cdot \neg Ry) \cdot (y = a)]$            | (4), UI            |
| (6) $\neg(Uy \cdot \neg Ry) \vee \neg(y = a)$           | (5), DeM           |
| (7) $(\neg Uy \vee Ry) \vee \neg(y = a)$                | (6), DeM, DN       |
| (8) $\neg Uy \vee [Ry \vee \neg(y = a)]$                | (7), Assoc.        |
| (9) $Uy$  | (3), S             |
| (10) $Ry \vee \neg(y = a)$                              | (8), (9), DN, DS   |
| (11) $y = a$  | (3), S             |
| (12) $Ry$   | (10), (11), DN, DS |
| (13) $Ry \cdot (y = a)$                                 | (11), (12), Conj.  |
| (14) $(\exists x)[Rx \cdot (x = a)]$                    | (13), EG           |

20. A formulation that omits this premiss can be given as follows:

- 1a. God =df the being than which none greater is possible.
2. God could exist in reality.
- 3c. If X does not exist in reality but X could exist in reality, then X could be greater than it is.
- 4c. God does not exist in reality. (assumption for *reductio*)
5. God could be greater than He is. (2, 3c, 4c)
6. God is a being than which a greater is possible. (5)
7. The being than which none greater is possible is a being than which a greater is possible. (1a, 6)
- 8d. It is not the case that God does not exist in reality. (4c-7, *reductio ad absurdum*)

It may seem that since (8d) is equivalent by double negation to "God exists in reality," Anselm's conclusion does follow. But this is not so. For "God exists in reality" to entail that God actually exists, it must of course mean not just (a) "nothing that fails to exist in reality is God," but (b) "something that exists in reality is God." Now since (4c) is properly regimented as " $(\exists x)[\neg Rx \cdot (x = a)]$ ," (8d) must be regimented as " $\neg(\exists x)[\neg Rx \cdot (x = a)]$ ." But the latter is equivalent to " $(x) \neg[(x = a) \cdot \neg Rx]$ ," which asserts (a) rather than (b). For (b) to follow, the premiss that God exists in the understanding—i.e., that  $(\exists x)[Ux \cdot (x = a)]$ —must be added, and (3c) expanded to read (3) "If X exists in the understanding but not in reality, and X could exist in reality, then X could be greater than it is." Then (b) can be derived, because " $(\exists x)[Ux \cdot (x = a)]$ " and " $\neg(\exists x)[\neg Rx \cdot (x = a)]$ " entail " $\neg(\exists x)[(Ux \cdot \neg Rx) \cdot (x = a)]$ ," which, together with " $(\exists x)[Ux \cdot (x = a)]$ ," entails " $(\exists x)[Rx \cdot (x = a)]$ " (as shown in note 19), which asserts (b).

21. This crucial point was originally brought to my attention by Gareth Matthews in a lecture he presented at Mt. Holyoke College in 1981.

22. Rowe, p. 9. Cf. Anselm, *Proslogium II*, In Feinberg, *Op. Cit.*, p. 6.

23. I am grateful to Richard Feldman, Earl Conee, Ralf Meerbote, and Paul Weirich for a stimulating and helpful discussion of the issues in this paper.